



# PRESERVATION HOTLINE #10

## Frequently Asked Questions About Local Historic Districts

South Carolina cities, towns, and counties can enact a historic preservation ordinance that provides for “the preservation and protection of historic and architecturally valuable districts and neighborhoods” under the SC Code of Laws (Section 6-29-870). There are three key parts of a local preservation ordinance.

- ◆ Creation of a board of architectural review to administer the ordinance.
- ◆ Establishes a process for the local governing body to designate historic districts and landmarks as historic zoning overlays attached to existing base zoning and subject to supplemental regulations.
- ◆ Protection of historic and architecturally valuable properties by requiring board approval before property owners can build, demolish, or make exterior alterations to properties in a historic zoning overlay.

***“What is a historic district?”*** A historic district is a geographically defined area with a concentration of older buildings, structures, sites, spaces, and/or objects unified by past events, physical development, or design.

***“Aren’t we already in a historic district?”*** Parts of your community may be listed in the National Register of Historic Places. National Register listing is primarily honorary. While buildings in a National Register district may be eligible for tax incentives and grants, they only receive limited protection from potential adverse changes or demolition caused by federal projects or projects requiring certain State permits. With a local historic district the historic character of the community can be better protected. See also *Preservation Hotline #2: National Register Listing/Local Designation*.

***“How is a local historic district created?”*** A local historic district is a zoning overlay created by an amendment to the official zoning map. Before the local governing body makes the final decision about the amendment, the planning commission reviews and makes a recommendation to the governing body.

***“Do we even have any historic buildings?”*** A historic properties survey can help identify historic buildings and potential historic districts. A building doesn’t need to be 200 years old, or a place visited by George Washington to be historic. Residents of late 19th century towns might think their late 19th century and 20th century buildings aren’t historic compared to Charleston, Beaufort or Camden. But even in places settled in the 1700s, the older commercial buildings mostly date from the same late 19th and early 20th century time period, as do many of the houses.

***“If I and my neighbors already maintain the historic character of our properties, why do we need a local historic district?”*** With a local historic district, you can be reassured that a new property owner across the street will help maintain the historic character of the district. In this era of growth and increased mobility, new owners may move into an area and not value the character and buildings of the historic district. Public outcry may stop some inappropriate development,

but these struggles are costly, in terms of time and money, for developers and the community. A historic zoning overlay sets up a predictable framework in which decisions about community appearance and historic properties can be made.

***"If my building is included in the local historic district, does that mean I have to make it look more historic?"*** No, you can maintain the current look of your building as long as you like. In a local historic district only proposed changes to exterior architectural features are reviewed. Preservation ordinances simply ask that new work fit in with the existing historic buildings and not remove the historic materials and features. There is no requirement for owners to remove later additions or put back missing features.

***"Will I have to fix up my building?"*** Nearly all preservation ordinances are reactive rather than proactive, which means there are not requirements on the owner to make any repairs. Housing and building codes that apply to all buildings in a jurisdiction may be used to ensure buildings are in a safe and livable condition. A few preservation ordinances include a demolition by neglect provision, which allows the local government to step in and prevent deterioration if an owner is deliberately letting a building deteriorate so that they can tear it down.

***"Will I be able to make changes to my property if it's in a local historic district?"*** Yes. Historic zoning overlays do not prevent change. The goal is that changes fit in with the historic building and district. The changes must meet the design criteria and guidelines for the local historic district.

***"What are design guidelines?"*** Design guidelines help the board of architectural review and property owners understand what changes are appropriate for a local historic district(s). Through text and illustrations, guidelines show acceptable alterations, additions, and new construction. Guidelines are developed with input from property owners and residents.

***"In a local historic district, what is my first step be if I decide to renovate?"*** Find out what the design review standards are for your district. If your community has design guidelines, ask for a copy from the city and review the sections relevant to your project. Talk with city staff and/or the design review board about your ideas in order to identify any concerns about the project. Then draw up your plans and submit an application to the board.

***"Will it be like Charleston/Williamsburg/Savannah?"*** The level of preservation required of owners is something that each community decides. Many local historic districts have more flexible requirements. These cities can be more restrictive because their local economies are heavily tourism-dependent and many of the tourists come to see their historic districts.

***"Can new buildings be built in a local historic district?"*** Yes. Visit any locally designated historic district and you will probably see new buildings. Nearly all local historic district design guidelines include sections on additions and new buildings. Both are encouraged to be compatible with the existing district, and yet distinct, so that residents and visitors alike can tell that it is a 21<sup>st</sup> century addition or building.

***"Can buildings be torn down in a local historic district?"*** A building may be torn down in a local historic district if it poses a threat to the health and safety of residents. For buildings that are in sound condition, a preservation ordinance typically outlines steps that must be followed for demolition requests. This can include a demolition delay (often 180 days up to one year) while other options to preserve the building are investigated.

***"Will interior projects be reviewed?"*** No. Preservation ordinances do not require review of interior changes, or the interiors of new buildings. Owners would still need to get a building permit if their interior project requires it.

***"Can I paint my house any color I want?"*** While some local historic districts in South Carolina do review paint colors others do not. Each community decides whether or not to review paint color.

***"Will my renovations be more expensive if I'm in a local historic district?"*** By encouraging owners to save historic material and features, projects may turn out to be less expensive, particularly when viewed over the long term. For example, repairing historic windows can be less costly than new replacements, and a house may be painted several times for the cost of artificial siding. Studies have found that a major commercial preservation project will typically cost four percent less than comparable new construction. Add in the costs of demolition and the savings could go up more.

***"Will my project take longer?"*** Slightly. In a local historic district, owners must get approval for their project before getting a building permit. Some cities authorize staff members to give approval for minor projects so the waiting period may be quite short. For larger projects or in communities without staff review, the review board typically meets once a month, so an owner should add an extra month or two to their project timeline.

***"Will I have to hire an architect?"*** It depends on the project. If an owner is doing minor work, they may simply need to show the review board photographs of the existing building, and a sample of the material. If it is a major project, then the building permit process may require that an architect draw or approve the plans.

***"Will designers feel restricted?"*** "A 1997 poll by Architectural Record magazine found that 79 percent of its readers believed that design review didn't restrict creativity. The magazine summarized that sentiment like this: 'Great architecture results from creative solutions to design problems involving a myriad of constraints, including site, client program, budget, etc. Historic district regulations are merely another constraint. (Design review boards) help to keep us on the right track, as long as their role is clearly defined.'" Robert Behre, "Architects Surveyed Support Ranking Buildings' Designs," *Charleston Post & Courier*, May 7, 2001.

***"What will happen to the value of my property?"*** While we can't predict the future, studies around the country suggested that property values increase faster in local historic districts. In some areas, local designation may help turn around a decline in property values. Studies in South Carolina in the late 1990s found that buyers valued the extra protection offered by local historic districts and were willing to pay higher prices.

***"Will a local historic district change how I use my property?"*** No. Local historic district overlays do not change the underlying base zoning. For example, if you previously couldn't use a piece of property for a commercial use, the historic district overlay won't change that. The design review process doesn't specify use, it only guides exterior appearance.

***"Will it hurt business?"*** Many of South Carolina's thriving downtowns have local historic district design review.

***"Who are the members of the historic district review board?"*** Community members are appointed to serve on the review board by the local governing body. The preservation ordinance can establish professional qualifications. Professionals whose experience can be helpful include: architects, historians, realtors, bankers, lawyers, interior designers, planners, architectural historians, educators, and/or archaeologists. Some ordinances require one or more members to be residents, property owners, or business owners in the local districts.

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